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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001688

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR PRM FOR ACTING A/S WITTEN

IO A/S HOOK AND PDAS WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY

AMMAN FOR RUSTY INGRAHAM

BAGHDAD FOR SR COORDINATOR FOR REFUGEES AND IDPS RICHARD

ALBRIGHT

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER

NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/25/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR PREF IO LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: IRAQI CHALDEAN REFUGEES SUFFERING IN
LEBANON

REF: BEIRUT 952

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a November 25 meeting with the Ambassador, Chaldean Archbishop Michel Kassarji spoke of the challenges facing the 5,000 Iraqi Christian refugees in Lebanon, including child labor, minimal education opportunities, and inability to find skilled employment. While the GOL has grown more understanding in the past year and a number of NGOs and his church provide assistance, Kassarji assessed that these service providers are meeting only 35 percent of the needs of Iraqi Christian refugee community. Kassarji confessed that he had originally falsely assumed the Iraqi Christians wanted to return to Iraq, when in fact, he said, he learned they are afraid and believe the situation will not improve anytime soon. Kassarji expressed a fear that Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria will relocate to Lebanon, believing Beirut offers greater economic opportunities. In addition to his church's future plans to aid the Iraqi Christians, Kassarji suggested the U.S. provide assistance to these refugees in Lebanon and encourage the GOL to do the same. End summary.

CHALDEAN POPULATION EXPLODED
WITH ARRIVAL OF IRAQI REFUGEES

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Chaldean Archbishop Michel Kassarji at the Chaldean church in Brazilia on November 25. Retired General Michel Kasdano and another volunteer from the Beirut Chaldean Bishopric also attended the meeting. Noting that the permanent Lebanese Chaldean population numbers 10,000, Kassarji remarked on the volume of Iraqi Christians now living in Lebanon, which he estimated to be 5,000, and approximately 4,500 of these are Chaldean. Not all of these refugees register with UNHCR. He further estimated that 300,000 Iraqi Christians have left Iraq since 2003.

DIFFICULTIES WORKING,

ATTENDING SCHOOL

13. (C) According to Kassarji, only one-third of the Iraqi Christian refugee children in Lebanon attend school because they need to earn money for their families. He said child labor was a big problem, and many of the children were exploited by working 12 hours daily, with little to no rest, and receiving meager wages. He said the children also faced problems attending school because of a difference in education levels and because the Iraqis studied previously in Arabic, whereas the Lebanese system is English- or French-based. The men, regardless of the educational background and work experience, can only get manual labor jobs because they are considered by the GOL to be in Lebanon illegally.

14. (C) Kassarji characterized the Iraqi Christian refugees as primarily intact families or widows and their children, with many physically disabled or mentally disturbed individuals. Approximately 70 percent of the Iraqi Christians live in the Sad al Boushrieh neighborhood in eastern Beirut.

CONDITIONS HAVE IMPROVED;
MAJORITY OF NEEDS REMAIN UNMET

15. (C) Kassarji assessed that the lives of Iraqi Christian refugees have improved over the past year, which he attributed to his church's media campaign. He explained that he had been promoting their cause as "minorities threatened

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in Iraq." He said framing it in this way, rather than "the plight of the refugees" resonated better with the GOL and that it has since "listened more." (Note: Calling the Iraqis "refugees" hits too close to home in Lebanon, which supports with a population of 400,000 Palestinian refugees. End note.) Previously, he continued, the GOL was deporting the Iraqi Christian refugees back to Iraq. Surete Generale, the GOL authority responsible for immigration matters, continues to detain those lacking legal status, and he noted that 528 Iraqi Christians were currently in detention (reftel).

16. (C) Listing the services his church provides for the refugees, including covering emergency medical bills, Kassarji said it is not nearly enough. He estimated that the NGOs assisting the Iraqis in Lebanon meet only 35 percent of their needs. He relayed his church's plans to build a social/medical center and a regular/technical school to accommodate the Iraqi Christians in Beirut.

THEY DO NOT WANT
TO RETURN TO IRAQ

17. (C) "No one wants to return," Kassarji stated definitively, adding, "There is no safe place in Iraq and they do not trust the Iraqi army." He expressed his personal hope that the refugees would one day return to Iraq, but asserted that it was not safe for them today. He committed to helping the Iraqi Christians until they were able to return. (Comment: We had been hearing, namely from Syriac League SYG Habib Efram, that the Iraqis wanted to return. That assessment may reflect the view by some interested Lebanese Christians that it is better for the Iraqi Christians to return to preserve an Iraqi Christian identity, just as they strive to preserve their own Lebanese Christian presence. End comment.)

18. (C) Kassarji confessed that he was unaware of the true aspirations of the refugees until they reacted to his church's campaigning efforts calling for their return. He said he received a letter from a refugee expressing anger and explaining that he did not feel safe to return and did not

have hope that things for Chaldeans would improve in Iraq.

NUMBERS MAY INCREASE AS REFUGEES
IN JORDAN, SYRIA COULD RELOCATE

¶9. (C) Noting that Lebanon has significantly fewer Iraqi Christian refugees than neighboring Jordan and Syria, Kassarji speculated that tight labor markets and rising rents could push Iraqis into Lebanon. He said many already cross the border from Syria to Lebanon illegally.

HOW THE U.S. CAN HELP

¶10. (C) Relaying that he had met with Interior Minister Ziad Baroud and Maronite Patriarch Sfeir on this issue, Kassarji suggested it would be helpful if the Ambassador raised the issue with PM Fouad Siniora and the Patriarch. He relayed that he found Sfeir to be "unhelpful." He appealed to the Ambassador for assistance in meeting the refugees' needs in Lebanon. In Iraq, Kassarji suggested the establishment of a safe haven that is protected militarily and through a UN resolution.

¶11. Note: In 2008, DHS teams working at Embassy Beirut have processed 1,217 cases (2,503 individuals) of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon for resettlement in the United States. DHS tells us it expects to send teams back to Embassy Beirut and process at least 2,000 cases during 2009. End Note.

SISON